

Race Report - Hellfire Corner 407km Audax 11-12th May

The Hellfire Corner Audax, run by the Highland CTC, is a 407km audax. Leighn and I chose to do this audax as Paris-Brest-Paris qualifying event, as well as a much needed training ride for the Transcontinental this summer! The ride included 4210m of climbing over some of the most remote roads in the North of Scotland, taking in part of the NC500 route.

The race started at 5a.m on Saturday 11th May, from Dingwall Community Centre, so Leighn and I elected to stay in the hall overnight, where the organisers kindly provided a 4 a.m wake-up call and breakfast! After a poor night's sleep in a hall full of snoring people, we woke up groggy-eyed and porridge-fuelled, ready to go! We started off in the lead group of around 10 riders, thankfully not needing to use our lights for such an early start. The first checkpoint was at Brora, approximately 75 km from the start in Dingwall. With a fast group and no climbs of note over this section, we sped along the back-roads and the A9, making it to Brora before the control officially opened! Whilst waiting for the control, we refuelled on some tasty breakfast grub at the cafe, and got ready to head out again. The course was progressively more challenging, so I had warned Leighn I would need to ease off on some of the hills to make it round!

The second control on the brevet card was a secret control. These are designed to ensure people follow the mandatory route, and avoided the riders taking shortcuts on the A9. It was a beautiful sunny day by this point, around 8:30 a.m, however a strong head-wind was beginning to whip up. The lead group was still together by the secret control, which was positioned by a stunning loch on a

quiet road, the organiser grinning at us as we cycled up.



The next leg was the run in to Crask, and the breakdown of the lead group. The control was located at the Crask Inn at 156km; a place we'd been informed by one of our riders was a lovely wee place and great to refuel. We were quite anxious to get there, and still full of energy with the sun shining down. As we turned inland, we began to hit the hills, and the wind. The group split, with a group of 4 going ahead up the road on the climbs. Behind, we maintained a group of 5, until that started to fragment, leaving myself and Leighn doing a 2-up to Crask, joined occasionally by another rider. Knowing the rest of the group weren't far behind; we pushed on in to the wind and rain up the long slog to the Crask Inn. Leighn was holding strong on the front, however I was beginning to fatigue pushing in to the wind, and feeling the effects of the earlier efforts with a painful right knee. After what seemed like an eternity, we made it to the Crask Inn. A great place for a control, this place is a lifeline in a remote part of Scotland. We had seen no buildings for miles, the Inn providing a haven for travellers, walkers and hungry cyclists! The dining room also provided the parish meeting place, and seemed to house everything the small community needed. What's more, they served the most amazing cheese toasties I've ever eaten!

Freshly refuelled, we rejoined a group of 5 riders setting off together for the continued head-wind crawl up to Tongue on the north coast, only 39km away from Crask. The wind was beginning to take its toll at this point, with Robbie's infamous quote of 'this wind is starting to damage my humour'! Chat was limited, as we grimaced our way in the windy sunshine with a good descent in to Tongue, to the control at the Post office cafe. Leighn was still riding strong,

sheltering me from the wind and taking huge turns on the front for the group. Finally, we are at the north coast! Having ridden the NC500 in 2018, it suddenly dawned on me just how hard the next sections were going to be, so I refuelled as much as my stomach would allow.

As we left Tongue, we knew we were still heading in to the wind to the next control at Durness, and I recalled the undulating roller-coaster climbs that characterised this section. They were punctuated by short periods of flat along the coast, but kept pulling back in-land up inlets and gorges. Having sheltered in the group to Tongue, I was able to take point on some of the hills, a rare move for me. They were short enough for me to get up without a crawl, but numerous enough to sap the strength from your legs. The sun was still out, and I had to remind myself to drink, knowing I would regret it later otherwise.

As we approached the steep hill down in to Durness, past Smoo cave, we headed to the next control. This was a free control, meaning we just have to evidence that we had been there with a receipt. We stopped at the first cafe we found, sitting outside to nom some well-earned treats at the most Northerly point of the course. We were over half way at this point, approximately 226km in and making great time, despite the conditions. From Durness, we knew we had a relatively short control to Scourie on the West Coast (approximately 41kms), with the prospect of two longer controls looming. After a relatively short break, and some photos, our group of 5 got ready to leave again.

The run in to Scourie was more challenging than I had remembered. Again lots of rolling climbs, including a beast out of Durness, and not much time to get any recovery. The wind was still blowing strong, and there is very little natural shelter in this part of the north. The roads became quite start-stop, as they narrowed quite considerably. The number of campervans on the road made it difficult to maintain a constant speed, having to pull in to let traffic pass in both directions was starting to really hurt my knee. I also had a run-in with a 4x4, who decided his vehicle was more important than my body, and I had to swerve off the road to avoid him. I was very shaken after such a close call, and took it very steadily for the next few kms. Getting in to Scourie again had a big climb, and by this point my legs just weren't playing ball. I'd begun to feel a bit dizzy, and struggled to breathe without my inhaler. Our group of 5 had strung out again, and I found myself on my own for a while, just thinking to myself to keep my legs turning, and this was one more bit I wouldn't have to ride again today. The group came back together before Scourie, and we dropped in to the control point at the local campsite. Scourie is a lovely wee village, but by this point I was finding I wasn't able to enjoy the scenery, knowing the type of terrain that approached us next.

From Scourie, the next control was located at Ullapool, approximately 68km from Scourie. It may not sound like a lot, but leaving Scourie at around 5:30pm, we knew we would be approaching Ullapool in the darkness. Leighn and I had ridden this section before, and I knew there were some beautiful sights, including

Kylesku, Ardvrek Castle on Loch Assynt and the impressive Quinag. Not far out of Scourie, we went through a very aptly named village of 'badcall', which I was thinking chimed with doing the audax!!! My fatigue levels meant that I just couldn't enjoy the beautiful scenery around me at this point; it was a case of head down and keep pedalling, and try not to lose touch with Leighn. The group kept fragmenting; at times we rode as a 5, but kept splitting in to 2/3's, and depending on who was stronger at any particular point. The sun started to go down as we passed Quinag, with Leighn stopping to take a stunning photo of the double sunset on the monster climb that seemed to go on forever. I knew at some point there was a descent in to Ullapool, and I just had to keep moving, fuelling as often as I could. My stomach had reached capacity, but my body desperately needed more energy. On the descent from Knockan Crag, after another lengthy climb, the darkness started to creep in. At this point we were a group of 3, just about, with me and Leighn around 200m behind the rider ahead. On the descent, a deer ran across the road between the group of riders, lucky not to hit us! We had been warned about the possibility of deer on the road, and the close encounter kept me hyper-vigilant at checking any movement in my peripheral vision. By this point, I was starting to get a little delirious. We were over the 300km mark, but I knew there was a big climb yet to come...



We again descended to the control at Ullapool, as a group of 5, located at the sailing club boat house. An AUK sign and rear flashing light pointed out the turn-off, as we approached in the dark at around 11pm. This is one of the best final controls I have ever been to. With only (only!) 73km left to Dingwall, the club and Highland CTC had provided hot food, drinks, cakes and a warm fire. The temperature had started to drop after dark, so the heat was most welcome, as was the accommodating nature of our helpful hosts. Robbie decided at this point that he needed a break, and would get an hour's sleep at the control before setting off. After a refuel, and putting on all the layers we owned (including waterproofs), myself, Leighn and 2 other riders headed out in to the night and the final stretch to Dingwall.

Aside from the long, long drag out of Ullapool to up past Inverbroom Lodge and Corrieshalloch Gorge, we knew we were to be greeted by a 20 mile (~35km) descent, almost to Strathpeffer. In theory, once the climb was over, the rest was plain sailing. We set off optimistic, feeling ok(ish), if tired. As we headed up the climb, the heavens opened. Big style. Despite our winter layers, we were mostly drenched. My feet were swimming. My waterproof gloves just about held it together. As the climb levelled off at the Corrieshalloch Gorge turning, we knew we still had 4-5 miles left of climb, albeit at a milder gradient. The group split, with me and Leighn behind, and the other two riders powering on up the climb. I had to maintain an even pace, ticking over until we reached the glorious descent. Or so I thought... As we reached the descent past Loch Glascarnoch, the temperature plummeted. The wet parts of my body froze, seemingly instantly. I felt my core temperature drop, and my head felt like a vessel leaking heat in to the night. Barely able to concentrate, and not able to ride out the descent in the cold, we got off and walked to warm up. We walked for 2/3 miles, with no sign of a house or building for shelter. A glance at my Garmin had recorded the temperature at -6 degrees. I had prepared for cold and wet weather (I had 5 base layers on), but I could not get warm again. The heat was sapping from my head and my wet feet. I was becoming delirious, alternating between shivering, crying and yelling. Desperate to seek shelter, I was tempted to call the emergency services, fearing hypothermia. A further failed attempt to ride out the descent and another walking break, and we decide to ride the downhill whilst pulling on our brakes. This provided a bit of resistance for us to pedal against. What should have been the easiest part of the course had become the hardest; and some of the most dangerous health-wise; riding I have ever endured. Even riding the brakes became too much, as our hands froze. Finally, we reached the village of Garve. I wanted to stop, hammer on a door and wait for daylight; we had time in hand despite losing ~2 hours. After a fruitless search, Leighn convinced me to keep going, with only 13 miles to Dingwall. We knew there were some mild climbs after Garve and through Strathpeffer, so we pushed on, riding the brakes on the downhill and pushing a much harder gear than my knees would allow to try and keep warm. It was at this point I decided I had to ride hard, as hard as I could, or I wouldn't make it. I was too cold, and delirious. So, I went in to time trial mode. We had been doing the club 10 mile TTs, so I got my head in the zone, and pushed ahead on to the front. Leighn dropped behind, as I

forged on as fast as I could. When I ran out of energy, Leighn switched it up... it became a 13 mile 2-up to the end after around 390kms of hilly, hard riding. The steep climb through Strathpeffer brought me back down with a bang, but it kept us warm. We knew we were close. We could see Dingwall in the distance. Finally, we rolled in to the finish at the Community centre. The last section took us 3 hours longer than planned. Without the rain and cold, we were on for a 2:30 a.m. finish. As it was, we finished nearer 5a.m. I was just glad to finish, and possibly the first woman home. We got in, cards stamped, and the hot aches began. Crumpled on the chairs in excruciating pain and incredibly tired, a full 24 hours after we left, the lovely organisers brought us food and drinks to help us feel more human. By far, this is the hardest, most challenging and the closest I have been to scratching from an event. Without Leighn, his strength and encouragement, I would not have made it through. I'd definitely do this audax again, stunning scenery and an incredible experience. Sums up what audaxing is about for me. Now time to recover, back up North for a similar 600km route in

reverse in June, watch this space!



